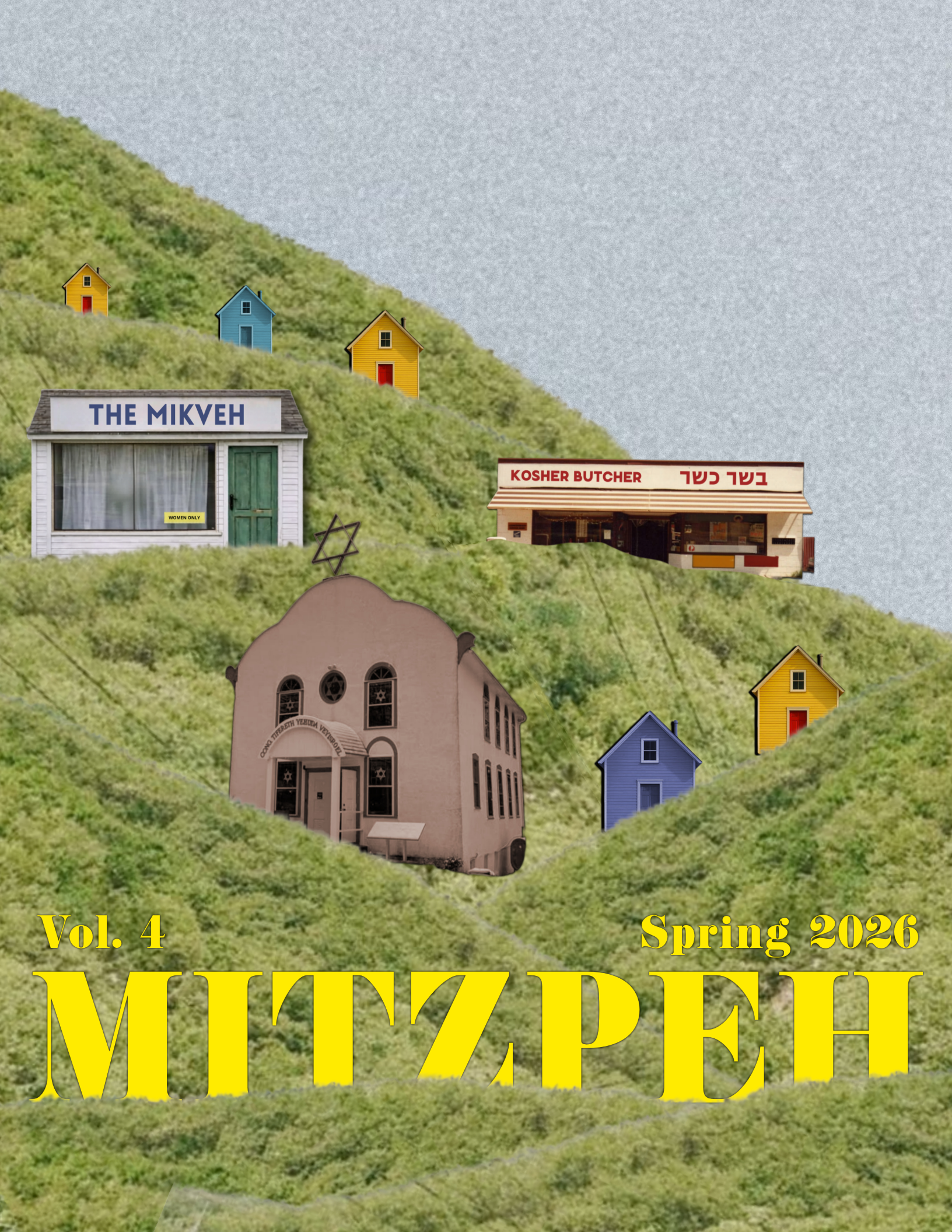

Vol. 4

Spring 2026

MITZPEH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

a community since 1983

Shabbat Around the World by: Gabby Kurzrok	$4
The Violence We Sanitized: Rethinking Korbanot By: Yoni Kidorf	$6
A walk through Jewish Art	$8
Are we Destined to Dwell in Tension? By: Liad Mussaffi	$10
Collective Effervescence By: Mali Jaffe	$14
The History of a Nation By: Ava Rowse	$16
In Defense of King Saul By: Gaby Goldberg	$18
Guide to American Jewish Womanhood By: Ava Rowse	$22
The Communities We Choose By: Aden Lerner	$24
Towards an Understanding of Jewish Peoplehood By: Gabi Stern	$28
Mitzpeh Debate	$31
Broadway: A Very Jewish Origin Story By: Gabriella Kurzrok	$32
Mitzpeh Merch	$34

Abraham left his homeland of Ur and traveled to Canaan at God's command. He spent his days there as a ger, a stranger, owning no land except the burial plot he purchased for his wife, Sarah. "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own," God said to Abraham. And this started the perpetual arc of the diaspora. We went from Canaan to Egypt to Babylon, experiencing the fields we could not run in, the houses we could not decorate, and the feeling we could not shake. But over time, as we yearned for our return to Zion, we settled in the chaos. We built temples, established kingdoms, and created traditions. We learned that home is not where you are, but who you are with.

College is a strange place. We leave carrying what we knew as home and enter an uncharted territory. But somewhere between that first day in August and that last day in May, we forget what it felt like to be strangers in the land that's not ours.

Mitzpeh's fourth magazine is all about that feeling of home and community. Since 1983, we have been a platform and voice for UMD's Jewish community, making us feel less like strangers and more like family.

As you hold this magazine, reading through our student-designed and written piece of art, I hope you feel that sense of belonging.

But we don't want you to just feel it, we want you to share it. So the next time you see that girl sitting alone at Hillel lunch or that boy with no Shabbat meals, extend an outstretched arm,

for we too knew what it was like to be strangers in the land of Egypt.

With love, Liad Mussaffi, Editor-in-Chief

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SHABBAT dinner

AROUND the WORLD

Gabby Kurzrok

Dafina — MOROCCO
A traditional slow-cooked stew that were typically prepared in communal bakeries for families to pick up on their way home from work. India, Eastern Europe and the middle east all have unique local takes on this recipe.
Sharbat — INDIA
A classic Indian drink from fruits and flowers, but a special version from grapes was made because it was hard for Jews in India to make or find kosher wine.

Cocido: Spain

A chickpea stew dating back to the 1400's, with a recipe that varies by region.

Ahraimi - LIBYA

A spicy fish dish with tomato sauce, bell peppers, onion, garlic, cumin, parsley, and smoked paprika or cayenne, serving as a main dish at many shabbat dinners.

Beid Hamine - EGYPT

Long-cooked hard-boiled eggs typically served with fenik, an Egyptian shabbat stew similar to Dafina. The cooking method gives the eggs their unique color and flavor.

Challah

A universal staple!

M'chencha - EGYPT

A staple dessert pastry also known as a filo shake that is often filled with almonds, sugar, citrus, and cardamom.

The Violence We Sanitized: Rethinking Korbanot

Yoni Kidorf

I am sick of the habitual oversimplification of Korbanot. To practicing Jews, Torah reading over the spring months is boring and repetitious. Even active Torah learners and Rabbis offer a relatable concession about how they struggle with finding meaning in the long chapters on temple rituals and korbanot.

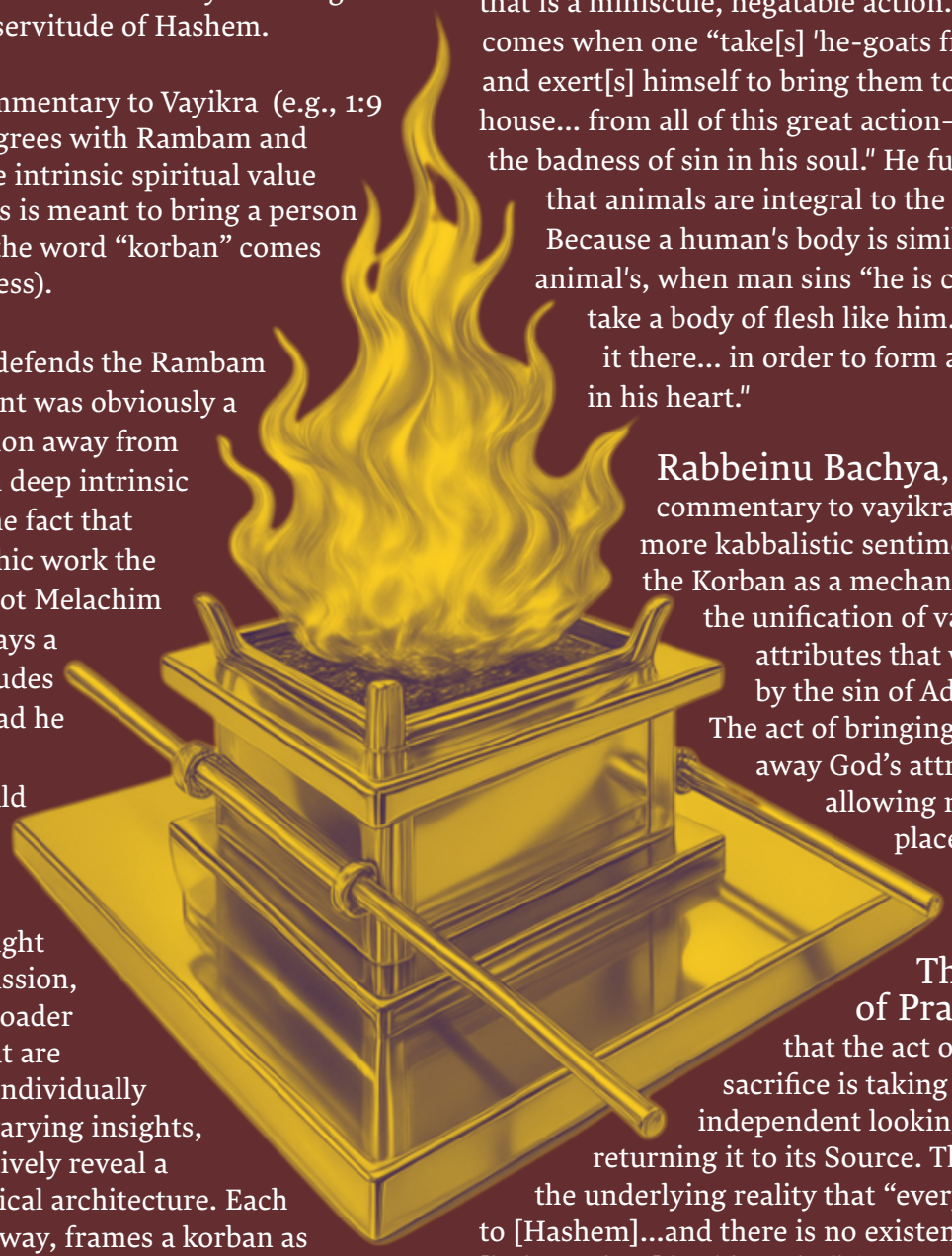
The discourse over how we should perceive korbanot is usually limited to the classical Rambam (Maimonides) and Ramban (Nachmanides) divide.

Rambam in Moreh Nevuchum (3:32, 3:46) explains that korbanot were a historical concession to ancient cultures who were accustomed to animal sacrifices as part of idolatry. The Torah was merely directing that instinct towards the servitude of Hashem.

Ramban, in his commentary to Vayikra (e.g., 1:9 and 4:2) sharply disagrees with Rambam and argues Korbanot have intrinsic spiritual value and the entire process is meant to bring a person closer to Hashem as the word “korban” comes from “karov” (closeness).

Isaac Abarbanel defends the Rambam and says his true intent was obviously a synthesis of a transition away from idolatry coupled with deep intrinsic value. He points to the fact that Rambam in his halachic work the Mishna Torah (Hilchot Melachim 11:1 and elsewhere) says a messianic vision includes korbanot, meaning had he held that they were a concession, they would disappear in the future.

Now that you are caught up on the usual discussion, let us advance to a broader range of opinions that are viciously neglected. Individually these thinkers offer varying insights, however, they collectively reveal a consistent psychological architecture. Each approach, in its own way, frames a korban as an experience that forces a person out of passive religious life, and into confrontation with something deeper.



The Sefer Hachinuch (mitzvah 95), explains that korbanot act in a way that speech cannot. When one merely acknowledges they have sinned, that is a miniscule, negatable action. Real change comes when one “take[s] 'he-goats from his pens' and exert[s] himself to bring them to the prepared house... from all of this great action—he will fix the badness of sin in his soul." He further asserts that animals are integral to the process. Because a human's body is similar to an animal's, when man sins “he is commanded to take a body of flesh like him... and to burn it there... in order to form a strong image in his heart."

Rabbeinu Bachya, in his commentary to vayikra introduced more kabbalistic sentiments. He sees the Korban as a mechanism for yichud, the unification of various divine attributes that were distanced by the sin of Adam and Eve. The act of bringing a Korban eases away God’s attribute of justice, allowing mercy to take its place and restore balance in the cosmos.

The Maharal of Prague explains that the act of bringing a sacrifice is taking a physical, independent looking existence and returning it to its Source. This act reveals the underlying reality that “everything returns to [Hashem]...and there is no existence [independent] besides Him” (Gevurat Hashem 69).

At this point, a pattern begins to emerge. Whether through physical exertion, cosmic repair, or metaphysical return, korbanot function as a break from ordinary existence towards something deeper.

Beyond the 'karov' etymology mentioned earlier, the Ramban offers a more visceral psychological layer. He believes korbanot are in place of the sinner. The person offering the animal should understand that “he deserves that his own blood be spilled and his body burned, had it not been for the compassion of the Creator who has accepted a substitute instead (Vayikra 1:9).”

Rav Solovetchick shares a similar sentiment. His descriptions of the process are graphic and startling. One should see the fats on the mizbeach “not [as] the animal’s, but his own fats, which congealed in his heart and gave him over into the hands of sin” (On Repentance pg. 266-268). Sacrifices are meant to be a shocking and overwhelming event. They are designed to shake a person up and rethink not only their actions but also their entire existence.

Rav Shagar’s theology of korbanot is radically different from traditional atonement theories. He frames sacrifice as the ritualized destruction of utility. For Shagar, an object must be violently divorced from its human-assigned purpose to be liberated from the "world of things." This act is a deliberate confrontation with a God who is utterly "Other" and beyond the reach of human reason. As he describes it, “the sacrificial act is the returning of the object... to the intimacy of existence... like ‘water in water.’” By negating the structured world of production, the sacrifice ceases to be a tool and becomes an entry point into the Divine.

Rav Kook, in contemporary dialogue, has been coined as the vegetarian icon who hopes to rid the Jewish people of korbanot. This is an absolute misconstrual of his work. Rav Kook maintains that in the Third Temple, animal sacrifices will initially be reinstated, stating it is "more correct to believe that everything will return to its place" once prophecy returns (Iggrot HaReiyah vol. 4). Nonetheless, he envisions a far-distant future where "the abundance of knowledge will spread to and penetrate even animals," elevating their consciousness to a human-like level (Olat Reiyah vol. 1). In this spiritually evolved era, he explains that "sacrifices, which will then be from grain, will be as pleasing to God" as the animal offerings of old (Olat Reiyah vol. 1).

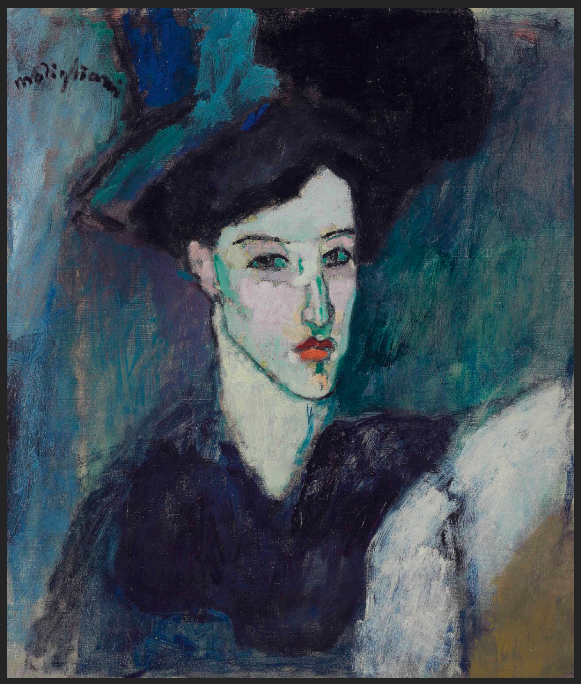
The repetitive details of Vayikra are not merely superfluous instructions, they are designed to be shattering experiences. Though we may no longer have the Temple, the challenge remains the same. We must find a way to break through the “congealed” habits of our lives and offer something of our actual selves back to the Infinite.

Mitzpeh's Art Gallery

Ben Shahn (b. 1898)
Jersey Homesteads, c. 1936
Mural

Behn Shahn (1898-1969), born in Lithuania to an Orthodox Jewish family, was a member of the Social Realist movement and created artworks focused on activism and social justice. Throughout his career, he did not identify as a "Jewish Artist," though he illustrated and published his own Haggadah and explored Jewish spirituality and community in his paintings (such as this one). His work in graphic design, magazine covers, traditional paintings, posters, murals, and street photography exemplify Shahn's fluidity and commitment to nonconformity. At a time when being labeled a "Jewish artist" would be limiting, Shahn worked to integrate Jewish culture in the world of social justice activism.

Modigliani, known for his surreal portraits and nude paintings, would introduce himself in the following manner: "My name is Modigliani. I am Jewish." Embracing his identity as an outsider within Europe, he painted La Juive to accentuate the beautiful 'Jewish' features anti-semites depicted as grotesque. Modigliani felt the urgency of his Jewishness, being disillusioned with French society in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair, when a Jewish army captain was framed and falsely accused of treason. Speaking fluent French from his Mother and resembling his Spanish and Portuguese ancestry, his Jewish identity wouldn't have been at the forefront if he didn't make a point to introduce himself as a Jew.



Amadea Mogdigliani (b. 1844)
La Juive c. 1907
Oil on canvas

Mark Podwal (b. 1945)
Seder, 2003
Acrylics, opaque watercolor and colored pencil on paper

Mark Podwal (1945-2024), famous initially for illustrations in The New York Times Op-Ed page, focused on Jewish tradition, history, and legend in his artworks. Podwall saw art as a form of prayer, and derived much of his Jewish identity and pride from creating his artworks. Today, the Mark Podwal Prize in Visual Art is awarded by the Elie Wiesel Foundation to celebrate Jewish life and confront Antisemitism through word and image.

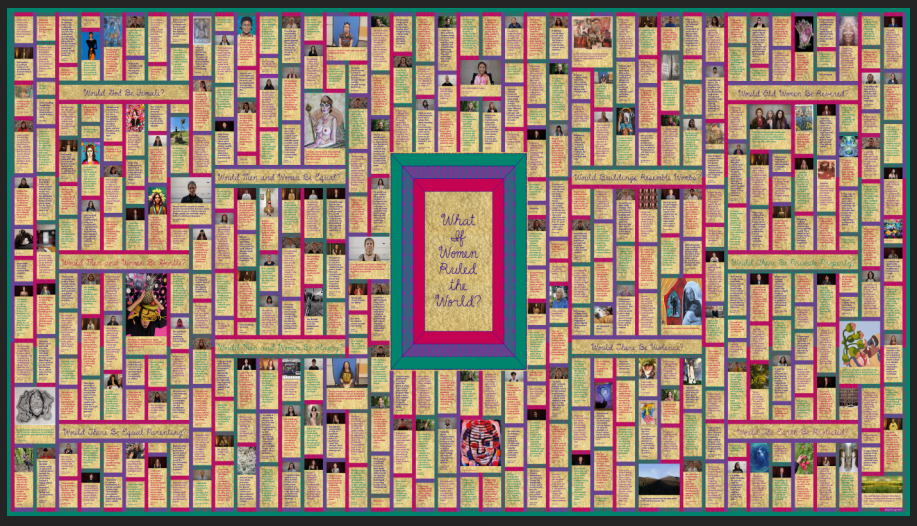
Allison Zuckerman (b. 1990)
Even a Flood Could Not Wash Away the Flame, 2025
Mixed media

Zuckerman, a contemporary artist based in Brooklyn, depicts women at the beach, surrounded by symbols and references to Jewish history. The horse riders reference Max Leibermann's "Two Riders on the Beach" (1901), which was seized by Nazis following the Kristallnacht. Zuckerman embeds references to several Jewish artists to represent the power of creating, maintaining, and restoring Jewish art. Despite the themes of loss and difficulty, this piece is a part of Zuckerman's collection on Jewish Joy, within which she argues that Jews confidently survive and thrive amidst existential dangers. Zuckerman explains that "Jews are no strangers to turbulent waves. We remain braced for them, buoyant and vigilant."

Marc Chagall (b. 1887)
I and the Village, 1911
Oil on canvas

Chagall painted I and the Village one year after moving to Paris from modern-day Belarus, where he grew up in a Hasidic Jewish community. His painting represents memories of his childhood and Jewish community, depicting mutual dependence between members of the community and animals as shown by overlapping and intersecting lines. Regarding his line choice and childhood, Chagall wrote, "Lines, angles, triangles, squares carried me far away to enchanting horizons." This painting employs Cubism, a popular art form in Paris at the time, and bright colors to create magic and a sense of nostalgia.

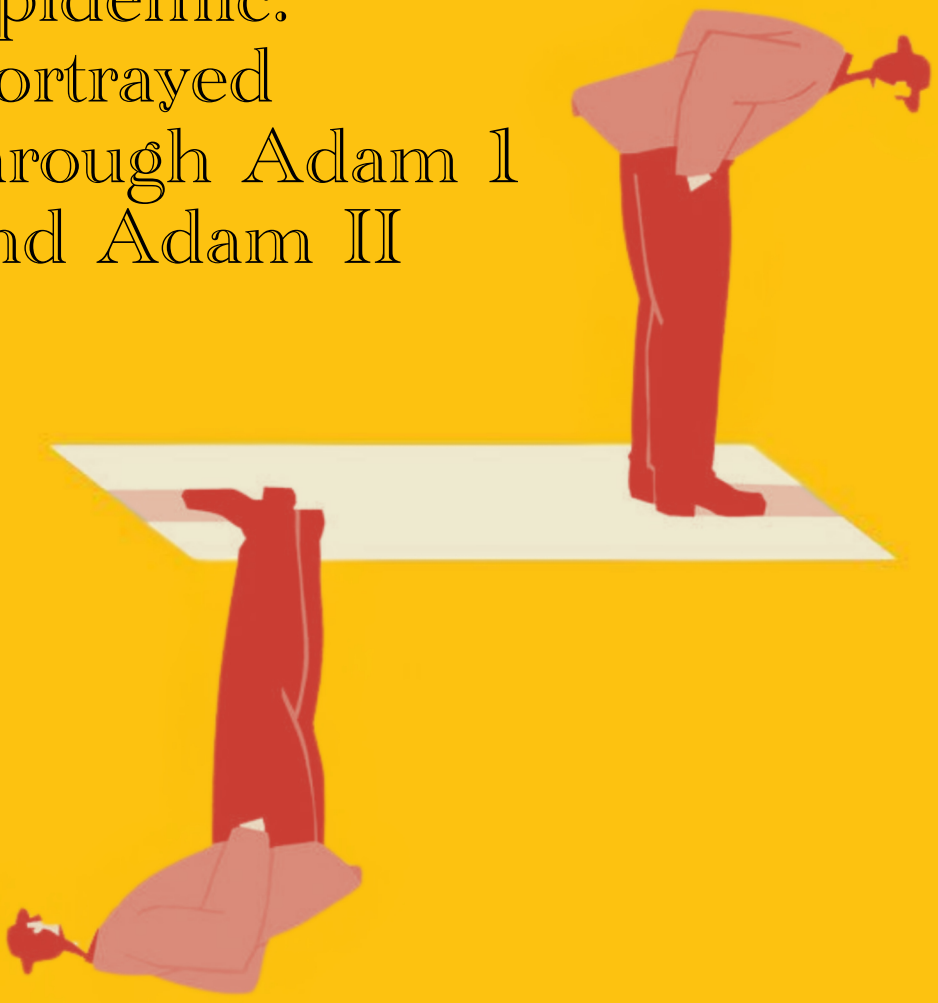
Judy Chicago (born Judith Sylvia Cohen in 1939) descends from a long line of rabbis, going back to the Vilna Gaon in eighteenth century Lithuania. Her work echoes her ancestors' long legacy of political activism, with a specific focus on feminism and gender equality. Despite calls from other artists and activists and an open letter urging Chicago to boycott Israeli museums, Chicago's "What If Women Ruled the World?" was recently exhibited at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 2025. The participatory quilt, made from a combination of physical and digital paintings, quotes, and photos, asks several questions about what modern society and community would look like if women were the main drivers of policymaking and political change.



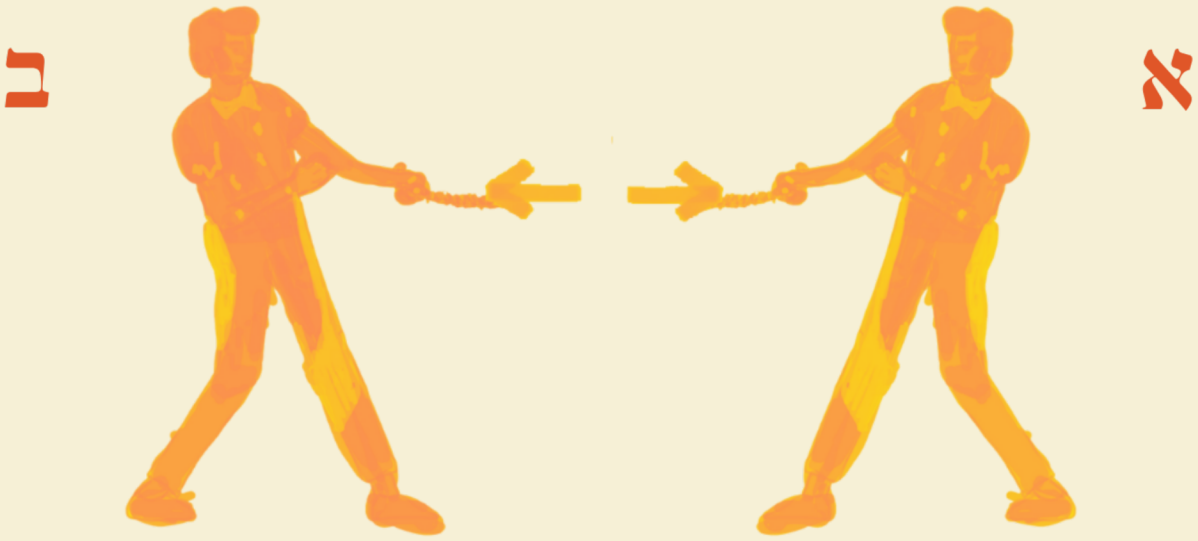
Judy Chicago (b. 1939)
What If Women Ruled the World? 2020
Mixed media

ARE WE DESTINED TO DWELL IN TENSION?

The Loneliness Epidemic: Portrayed through Adam 1 and Adam II



By: Liad Mussaffi



In Genesis, there are two distinct accounts of creation. Seemingly odd, the two narratives serve two theological functions. Namely, what it means to be lonely. This is not a unique emotion. Everyone will encounter that swallowing feeling that echoes through your body. Even Rav Soloveitchik (The Rav), who wrote in his book, The Lonely Man of Faith, described it as a "passional experience of loneliness which trails [him] constantly." Insofar as we roam this earth, we will be lonely. It is in our very nature, from creation until death, that this loneliness will sit within our veins, pulsating like blood.

That is because God quite literally designed it that way.

He created two distinct versions of man, each with a distinct experience of the world.

In Genesis I, God created Adam I.

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth," He said.

In Genesis II, however, Adam II reads as a completely different character.

"And the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from the east, and He placed there the man whom He had formed."

Adam The First, The Majestic Man

From a theological understanding, Adam I is a creator, as he was fashioned by the Creator. He is charged with the responsibility of dominating natural elements, which leads him to explore the secrets of nature. Adam I wants to explore his humanity on his quest guided by dignity, as Genesis I said “man is a little lower than angels.” Adam the first, possesses the ultimate qualities of his Creator, namely, the ability to create. This creative side enables man to use his intellect and ask foundational questions like ‘how,’ not ‘why.’ This quest for knowledge helps keep him in touch with his humanity and therefore, live with dignity, because to be human is to be dignified.

But dignity cannot be obtained without glory. We only know of dignity because we experience glory, and there is no glory without responsibility. Therefore, only once man rises up to the layers of creativity entrusted to him by his Creator can he become dignified.

But how does one achieve dignity? Dignity is a social category, a behavioral technique. It is formed by societal approval that can only be achieved when you make your presence known. The word Kavod in Hebrew simultaneously translates to dignity and weight. A dignified person, therefore, is a weighty person.

This is why Adam the first was created concurrently with Eve. As the Rav profoundly put it, “there is no dignity in anonymity.” Adam the first was placed into a community from the moment he was created to display his dignity, for a man in solitude has no opportunity to be glorified.

Adam the Second, The Man of Faith

Adam the second’s loneliness is built into the text. He was made alone and roamed the garden alone. That loneliness doesn't just sit in his physical make-up, though; it leaks into the existential. He is designed to be the watcher, and never to be watched.However, Adam II finds meaning in the mundane. He finds solace in living his days as a simple man, for he must not forget his humble origins of mere dust.

He creates an intimate relationship with God not in quantum metaphysics and ontological reasonings but in the late-night breeze, the warmth of a coffee cup, and the smell of morning dew. However, he has never forgotten how radically other God is. Adam the second’s separation from nature creates an existential uniqueness that is not cured by dignity as we see it with Adam the first, but by redemption.

He sees his loneliness as something that cannot be fixed from the heights of achievement because it comes from the depths of internal

Therefore, Adam the second's community is radically different from Adam I. It does not need collaborators, commentators, and colleagues. It needs commitment. The Rav argues that his community is a covenantal one because the self is not dignified through acknowledgment and awe of others, but rather through a much simpler understanding of one another: we are all in pursuit of experiencing each other with a sense of complete acceptance and vulnerability. A feeling that can only be obtained when we seek not only to be heard, but to hear.

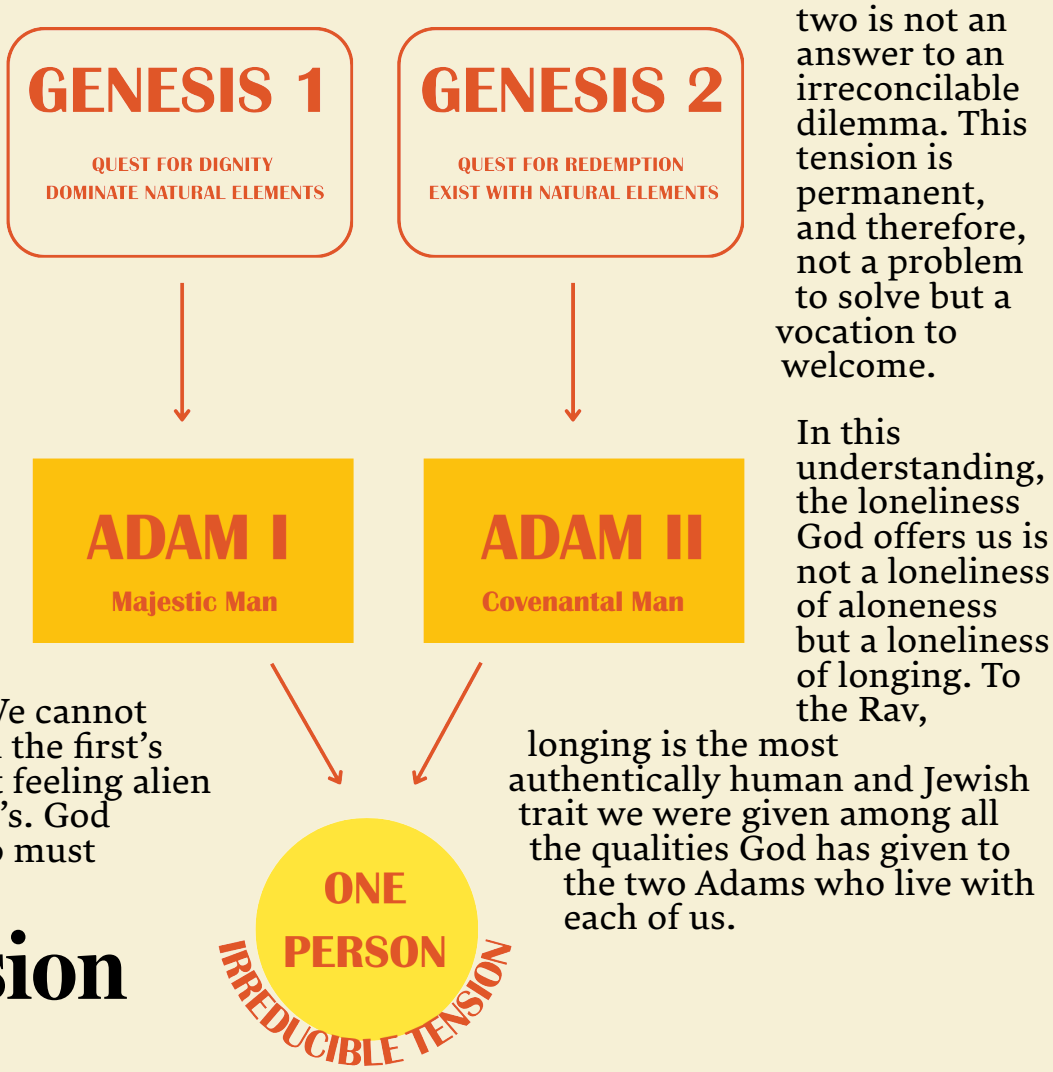
Paradox is built into the very structure of human existence. We cannot fully embrace Adam the first's community without feeling alien to Adam the second's. God created a being who must

The Tension

reside in two worlds simultaneously and must abide by two separate obligations. A human being who is cursed with everlasting loneliness, never able to feel at home in one place.

We all experience this tension. When we experience college, we miss out on our hometown. When we pursue academics, we dismiss friendly outings. This is the duality God placed on it. Wherever we are, there will always be somewhere we're not.

However, because the two understandings of Adam are divinely written, neither can be abandoned. Therefore, the idea of coexistence between the two is not an answer to an irreconcilable dilemma. This tension is permanent, and therefore, not a problem to solve but a vocation to welcome.



In this understanding, the loneliness God offers us is not a loneliness of aloneness but a loneliness of longing. To the Rav, longing is the most authentically human and Jewish trait we were given among all the qualities God has given to the two Adams who live with each of us.

Judaism's Collective Effervescence

By Mali Jaffe

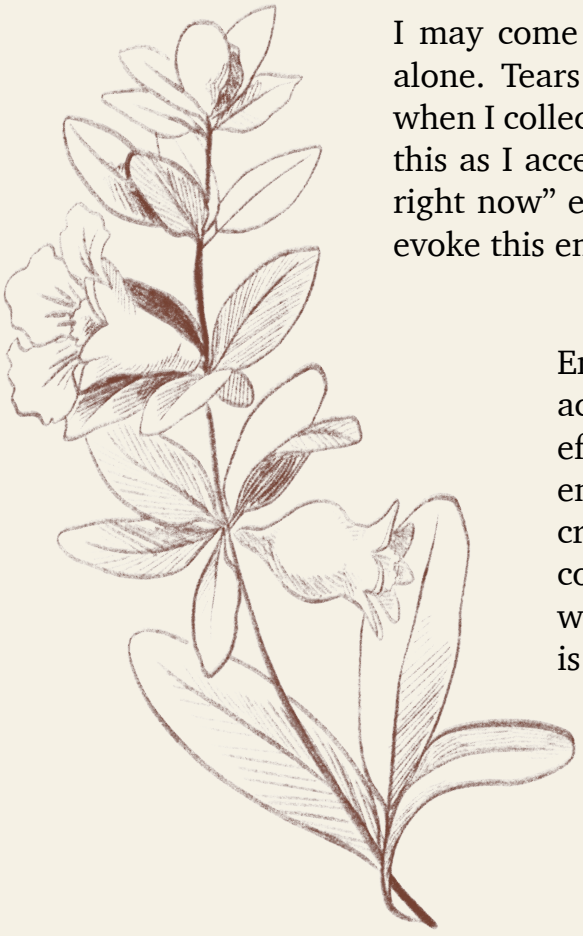
I have something a little embarrassing to admit. Every time I attend synagogue, be it for Shabbat services or the high holidays, I become so emotional that I cry.

On Shabbat, it's because I'm thinking about how every person in the room has come together to share the end of their week.

On Yom Kippur, I'm overwhelmed by our belief in each others' capacity for change, that we ask and work for redemption, and that each of us in the room will spend the upcoming year bettering ourselves.

On Simchat Torah, it's because we are celebrating an ancient tradition that we choose to repeat every year—because Judaism really is the greatest book club in history.

It happens outside of the synagogue, too. On Sukkot, it's because I'm watching my Dad's students build the sukkah in our backyard, as they do every year, and they hang the paper chains and decorations I made when I was 10.



I may come across as a little emotional, but I'm sure I'm not alone. Tears or not, this intense emotional energy that I feel when I collect with my people is completely normal (I tell myself this as I accept a tissue from my mom, who gives me a "stop it right now" expression). In fact, such traditions are designed to evoke this emotion. It's called collective effervescence.

Emile Burkheim, a French sociologist and founder of academic sociology, described collective effervescence as a sense of unison and harmony that emerges from collective behavior. Moments that create this feeling define religion and create community. When we gather for a common purpose, we create a sense of "oneness" and "awe" that I find is very central to Judaism.

“These are things that are limitless…of which a person enjoys the fruit of the world… the story of Torah encompasses them all.”

Eilu Devarim

Judaism creates many opportunities for collective effervescence and connection to occur. Some of these opportunities are outlined in Eilu Devarim, the morning liturgy. They include group study, visiting the sick, and sitting Shiva. Additionally, I think of Kashrut, which encourages Jews to share meals; and Shabbat, when we come together for the night and a full day after, shutting down every external part of our lives to focus on our community in the now.

Although the Torah and our commentaries provide explanations as to why Jewish traditions require multitude, I believe that Judaism sustains itself as a close-knit community because of our natural inclination to gather. The rules that dictate our practice represent thousands of years of valuing community and collective participation.

While my non-Jewish friends’ parents come home from work late on a Friday night, I sit with mine for Shabbat dinner and talk about our week.

When I began my first semester at Maryland, I (along with the four hundred students that signed up for Hillel’s FreshFest) was immediately welcomed and involved in the Jewish community on campus.

And when I go home for holidays, I celebrate the community that continuously brings me in, that says we are one, and my mom passes me a tissue from her purse.

The History of a Nation

By: Ava Rowse

The tension between "normality" and "uniqueness" has long shaped Jewish self-understanding. As European states debated Jewish emancipation, this tension became increasingly urgent — sharpening into a question that cut to the heart of Jewish existence: could a people integrate into broader society without abandoning the particular religious and national character that had long defined them?

The dominant answer, among both Jewish thinkers and European intellectuals, was that Jewish particularity was an obstacle to full civic integration, and that emancipation required Jews to disavow their distinct nationhood. Western Jews were forced to navigate between preserving their distinctiveness and demonstrating loyalty to the nation-states they lived in — a tightrope walked differently by each generation, each movement, each thinker.

In order to "denationalize" Judaism, thinkers of the Reform movement rejected texts, rituals, and institutions to emphasize universal religious principles, presenting Judaism as a modern, amenable religion. Neo-Orthodox thinkers such as Samson Raphael Hirsch pursued a different path, maintaining devotion to Jewish law while reinterpreting national symbols metaphorically to promote European patriotism. The Wissenschaft des Judentums — a group of Jewish German intellectuals pushed to explore the nature of Judaism by a resurgence of antisemitism — subjected the Jewish past, Biblical texts, and Rabbinic legislation to critical analysis. Each, in their own way, was negotiating the boundaries between religious fidelity and social acceptance, searching for a version of Judaism that the modern world might accept.

Heinrich Graetz refused the terms of that search entirely.

Dissatisfied with the Reformers' rejection of sacred traditions, his monumental Structure of Jewish History aimed to restore a sense of pride in Jewish uniqueness — not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as something worth protecting. Where others saw particularity as a liability, Graetz saw it as the very soul of the tradition. He sought to present the totality of Jewish history, synthesizing the religious and political dimensions that earlier scholars had treated as separate, and in doing so, to offer a new answer to the emancipation question.

Graetz begins from the conviction that Judaism cannot be reduced to either a religion or a polity: its defining feature is the perpetual negotiation between the two. Judaism, he insists, is "not a religion of the individual... but a constitution for a body politic." This dual nature — religious universality housed in a particular national form — grounds his entire historical narrative. Severing these two dimensions does not purify Judaism; it distorts it.

Without national life, the tradition becomes "an inwardly hollowed-out and half-uprooted tree," beautiful perhaps from a distance, but no longer drawing sustenance from the soil that made it grow.

Greatz treats Jewish history as the unfolding of a guiding idea — not merely a tale of endless misfortune, but a story with direction and inner meaning.

Political collapse, in his telling, becomes the condition for a new intensification of religious life. The Babylonian exile, which wiped out the last traces of Jewish political existence, becomes the moment when the people were finally permeated by the pure God-idea, stripped of everything except what mattered most. And the prophets — emerging precisely at the moment political unity collapses — become "the glory of the Jewish spirit," their voices rising as the walls fell, their message universalizing the Davidic ideal and projecting a future in which the ethical monotheism of Israel extends beyond its borders. Loss, for Graetz, is never only loss. It refines; it concentrates; it prepares the spirit to endure.

This redemptive logic extends into the diaspora. Meeting the threat of cultural dissolution with the only tools available, the Jewish community built the Talmud — an extraordinary architecture of law and interpretation that gave Jewish communities structure. Essentially, the fallen borders of the homeland, replaced with something that can't die by sword: a shared intellectual, ethical and spiritual world. By recording majority and minority opinions on the most minute matters of Jewish law, the sages created a tradition that could travel. A way to understand the Jewish way of life, when communities were continiously rebuilding.

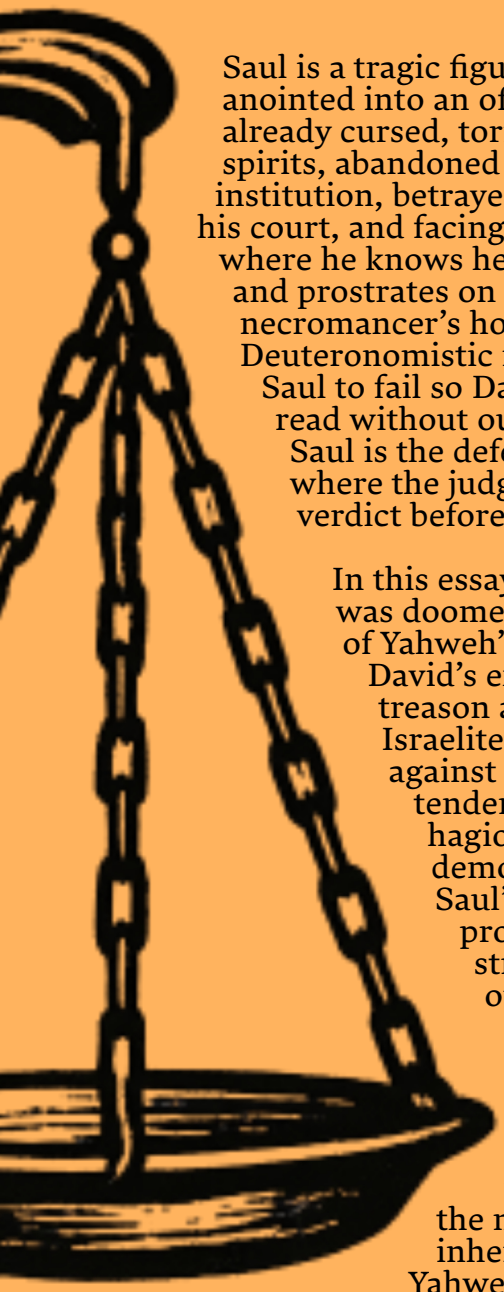
By structuring Jewish history this way, Graetz issues a quiet but profound challenge to every thinker who insisted that Jewish nationhood must be sacrificed for emancipation. What many perceived as Judaism's obstacle to universal recognition — its national particularity — becomes, in his account, the very mechanism through which its universal religious truth is revealed. The particularity is not incidental. It is the vessel. By tracing Jewish life across seventeen centuries of dispersion, Graetz demonstrates that Jewish history is best understood as a continuous negotiation between political and religious existence — a negotiation that both preserves identity and projects it into a broader, enduring vision.

To abandon that negotiation, he argues, would not modernize Judaism. It would unravel the very structure that has allowed it to endure. To refute the national aspect of Judaism is to erase its very heart.

By: Gabriel Goldberg

In Defense

of King Saul



Saul is a tragic figure. A man anointed into an office Yahweh had already cursed, tormented by evil spirits, abandoned by every institution, betrayed by his heir and his court, and facing a final battle where he knows he will die, starves and prostrates on the floor of a necromancer's house. The Deuteronomistic narrative needs Saul to fail so David can rise, but read without our modern biases, Saul is the defendant at a trial where the judge decided the verdict before it even began.

In this essay, I argue Saul was doomed to fail because of Yahweh's prejudices and David's extensive acts of treason against the Israelite kingdom, cutting against the conventional tendency of Davidic hagiography and demonstrating how Saul's demise was a product of structural forces out of his control, largely not his own mismanagement.

The first issue for Saul is that the monarchy he inherits is one Yahweh never wanted to exist. 1 Samuel 8 establishes the origin story of the Israelite kingship and it is a story of divine resentment. Samuel's sons, appointed as judges over Israel, are corrupt; the people respond by demanding a king to rule them like other nations. Through Samuel, he warns that a king will conscript their sons as soldiers, turn their children into slaves, and seize their property — including, questionably, their slaves, as if slaveholders losing their slaves is a moral issue worth protesting — and tax them into submission. Yahweh is on the record stating that the monarchy as an institution is illegitimate. This all but guaranteed the first king was never going to get a fair shot, as the office itself was cursed from the moment it was created.

In 1 Samuel 15, Yahweh, through Samuel, gives the infamous demand to slaughter the Amalekites and "spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys." Saul subsequently lays waste to the Amalekites, capturing their King, Agag, as well as the best sheep, oxen, lambs, and "all else of value" for sacrifice to Yahweh. Yahweh nonetheless tells Samuel he regrets making Saul king, Samuel scolds Saul for disobedience, and Yahweh officially "rejects [him] as king" — a transparent instance of divine bias clouding judgment at Saul's disadvantage.

Saul's divine legitimacy is withdrawn (if it ever existed) for being a people pleaser. He successfully destroys the Amalekites and seizes their most valuable assets, but puts off killing King Agag and the absolute highest quality animals for later. This literally does not violate Yahweh's command! Yahweh commanded Saul to spare no one and kill all of the women, men, children, and animals, which is exactly what he planned to do. He was going to kill Agag and the other animals he captured, but opted to do it in a divine sacrifice at Gilgal. What about this does not fulfill Yahweh's command to kill them? Yahweh didn't say "kill them the moment you see them," or command the Amalekites to be killed in a certain time frame at all. This is simply an example of Yahweh's preconceived bias against the concept of a monarchy; the punishment does not fit the supposed "crime."

Saul, in fact, was quite restrained compared to the standards upheld by Ancient Near Eastern kings. Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE) of the Assyrian Empire, for example, hung enemies on posts, flayed their bodies, lined city walls with their skins, beheaded captives, and mutilated the bodies of prisoners. The Balawat Gates, the main doors to various buildings at the ancient city Imgur-Enlil, depict Shalmanesser III's (859-824 BCE) army cutting off the extremities of their enemies and hanging their heads from walls. The barbarism of the Assyrian Empire during the Iron Age is well-documented. Nahum 3:19 condemns the king of Assyria's "constant malice" and brutal reign.

Saul in a norm-breaking act of mercy captures Agag alive and the highest-quality animals just so he can properly dedicate it to Yahweh. Yahweh should not want Saul to act more like Ashurnasirpal or Shalmanesser. In fact, Yahweh should be ecstatic that his negative warnings about a king — how he'd conscript Israelite sons, seize the peoples' property, and rule as a brutal tyrant — do not come true. Yahweh's first king acts with a level of compassion unseen in the region and dedicates his victory to Yahweh through sacrifice — proving the rejection of Saul is not about Saul at all, but about Yahweh's preexistent urge to punish the institution itself.

The true irony is that it is actually David and Solomon who embody Yahweh and Samuel's catastrophic predictions. In terms of mass conscription, it is David who conducts a military census, despite the objections of his top army commander Yoav. Regarding a king seizing Israelite resources and making the people his slaves, it is Solomon who institutes the forced labor regime and conscripts 30,000 people, which is canonically directly at fault for causing the dissolution of the United Monarchy of Israel. Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam, is asked by the Israelites to "lighten the harsh labor and heavy yoke that your father laid on us." In response, Rehoboam tightens his sanctions on the people and signals his disdain for their request with the infamous quote: "my father flogged you with whips, but I will flog you with scorpions." Not a response that is likely to induce national unity. Yahweh predicts a monarchy will create ruthless tyranny, gets a dovish monarch, deposes him unfairly, and replaces him with a lineage of ruthless tyrants.

Another core element of Saul's sabotage was David's role as an internally destabilizing enemy of the Kingdom of Israel. The first piece of evidence for this is David's manipulation of Ahimelech and the consequences of this. In 1 Samuel 21, David tells Ahimelech the priest that he is on a secret mission ordained by Saul and that he forgot his weapons, so Ahimelech agrees to give him Goliath's sword. In reality, David was on the run from Saul and lied about being on this top secret mission. Doeg the Edomite, Saul's chief herdsman, witnesses the encounter and reports it to Saul. Saul summons the priests of Nob, accuses Ahimelech and the priests of treason, and orders his servants to kill them. They refuse, so Saul commands Doeg to do it, who obliges and kills 85 priests and everyone who lived in the town of Nob. One of Ahimelech's sons—Abiathar—escapes and tells David what happened, and David states the deaths are his fault: "I knew that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would tell Saul. I am to blame for all the deaths in your father's house."

David is calculated here; a massacre of the priests in Nob advantages him politically. It leads to the priestly class turning against Saul, creates internal resentment against Saul's monarchy he can capitalize on to gain power, and forces Saul into a difficult position. He can either pursue David and continue to crush all dissent, which would increase his unpopularity and make David look even better

as an alternative. Or, he can sit back and continue to watch his regime collapse, with Jonathan relinquishing the throne to David, the priestly class defecting and arming an interloping fugitive, and foreign military threats such as the Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites, seeking to topple the United Kingdom of Israel.

From this perspective, ordering the massacre was simply a move of realpolitik from Saul. Facing a massive domestic legitimacy crisis and external security threats, we should view the massacre at Nob as a "last-ditch" effort from Saul to preserve national stability and reinstitute order. None of this is to say it is morally acceptable; of course the slaughtering of innocents is wrong. But David is no better than Saul, and these are the two options the Israelites are faced with here. During his allyship with the Philistines, David systematically murdered entire towns and villages with the explicit goal of ensuring no survivors could identify him. From sexually exploiting Batsheva and organizing the death of her husband, to doing nothing in response to his son Absalom raping his daughter Tamar, David is far from a morally upstanding character. Recall that Saul loses the divine right to the throne because he is too merciful; likely a better problem to have for a monarch than rapist coup-orchestrator.

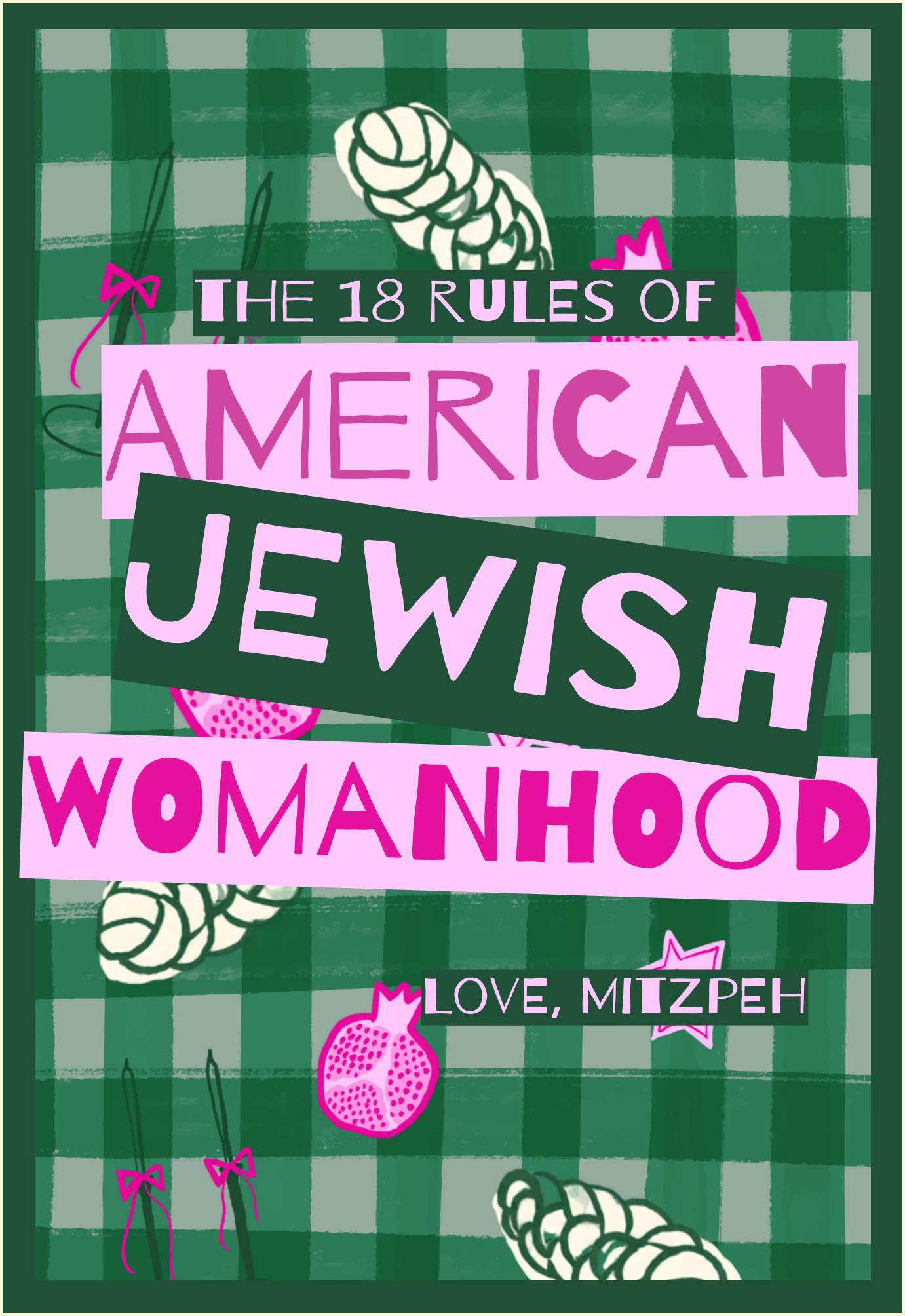
We can also charge David with treason against the United Kingdom of Israel, as his record of allying with and fighting alongside foreign militaries and enemies of the state is well-documented. In 1 Samuel 22, David entrusts his parents to the Moabites for protection when he was a fugitive, a nation Saul actively fought during his reign. The most instructive case is David's extensive alliance with the Philistines as described in 1 Samuel. On the run from Saul, David defects to the Philistine King Achish of Gath. Achish grants him the city of Ziklag, which he ruled for a year and four months.

When the Philistines were about to go to war against Israel, Achish informs David that he and his men would have to fight alongside them against Saul's army. Without hesitation, David says "you surely know what your servant will do," and Achish promises to make David his bodyguard for life. The only reason David did not fight against Saul directly is because the Philistine generals did not trust David. Achish insists that David has been extremely loyal to him, but agrees to send him away.

Yet, David still insists on fighting against Israel, saying he has been nothing but loyal and there is no reason "I should not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king." Some scholars argue it's ambiguous whether or not David would've actually fought against Israel, but he marched alongside the Philistine army to Jezreel and pleaded with Achish to let him fight. How is he any different from the Amalekites or Ammonites, who also sought to militarily crush Israel?

Through this lens, Saul's position evolves from merely challenging to fatally doomed. He loses his divine right to rule on an unfair technicality, watches his own son renounce the throne in favor of his main political enemy and his priesthood materially aid him, all while dealing with an overwhelming external military threat in the Philistines. King David is widely understood as the archetypal biblical king; the warrior-poet and ultimate underdog who slayed the Philistine beast Goliath and first Israelite leader to conquer Jerusalem. Saul, on the other hand, was an incompetent and uninspiring leader who oversaw a period of instability and crisis in the Israelite kingdom.

In reality, a deeper scrutinization of the story reveals Saul was doomed to fail because his rule was plagued with insurmountable internal and external threats, one of which being a manipulative seditionist ordained by the heavens. David actually is an archetypal king, but not in the positive sense we assume. He is no different than the kings who ruled the ancient Levantine city-states: brutal, transactional, and power-hungry.


THE 18 RULES OF
AMERICAN
JEWISH
WOMANHOOD
LOVE, MITZPEH

1. Be Yourself

you were made in God's image

2. Read Books

knowledge is freedom

3. Help Others

you are nothing without your community

4. Ask Questions

a curious woman will know exactly what to ask

5. Have Chutzpah!

our tradition knows no docile women

6. Cast a Vote!

engage in our country's political discourse

7. See the Beauty

look for divine beauty everywhere you go - if it's not there, create it

8. Speak with Tact

Know when your voice or your silence will be more powerful

9. Invest in Yourself

you know what you need to reach your full potential

10. Host Guests

open your home to people in your community

11. Be Modest

walk, talk, and act with modesty, wear whatever you want

12. Model Empathy

publicly consider the needs and feelings of others

13. Be a Leader

don't wait for anybody else to step up

14. Build Bridges

actively seek connection across difference

15. Prioritize Joy

Jewish joy keeps us alive. sing and dance and laugh for the love of living

16. Do Not be Afraid

The most common phrase in the torah tells us never to fear

17. Be a Proud Jew

your heritage gives you strength. Don't be shy about where you come from

18. Listen Carefully

know the difference between loud and correct

THE ONE THING STANDING BETWEEN YOU AND GOD

The Communities We Choose, the People We become

By: Aden Lerner

Growing up, my mom would consistently reinforce the idea to my siblings and me that we are products of our environment. She would implore us to consider the friends we had and the people we surrounded ourselves with, as they would significantly shape our decisions and who we become. As was typical with my decision-making in high school, I blew her off. I believed that I was an independent person, my choices were entirely my own, and if I wanted to make poor ones, it was solely up to me.

As high school progressed, however, I slowly began to understand that, like the vast majority of the advice my mom bestowed upon me, it was correct. During my senior year, I had the opportunity to take AP psychology, where I learned, among other fascinating ideas, a concept that reinforced the veracity of my mother's statements.

Psychologist John B. Watson originated the idea of behaviorism in the early 1900s. He claimed that behavior is learned entirely through interaction with one's environment. Watson believed wholeheartedly that if you control someone's environment, you can essentially shape their behavior completely.

Although behaviorism is not accepted today as a fully exhaustive explanation of the self, it sheds light on an essential aspect of the human condition. As social creatures, humans require an environment that stimulates their need for growth and belonging. However, today, strong communities that do so often seem distant. The World Health Organization estimated that 1 in 6 people have reported feeling loneliness, forcing them to find communities in nontraditional and often harmful ways, frequently online.

The epidemic of loneliness and the harmful effects it has on both individuals and communities as a whole are well-documented throughout Torah. Specifically, Parashat Ki Tisa and the event of the golden calf shed light on the impact of isolation on a people and the extreme lengths they will go to in order to discard it.

After the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were on a spiritual high, which culminated in the revelation at Sinai. At this point, they are at their most cohesive. The text intentionally goes as far as to describe the nation in the singular, exclaiming, "having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain" (Exodus 19:2). Here, the text uses the word וַיִּחַן, the singular version of encamped, to display how unified the nation was before the revelation of the ten commandments. Nonetheless, after Moses ascended the mountain, the people began to feel the symptoms of loneliness. They felt like many today, that they had been deserted. In this case, by God and by their leader, Moses. In response to this seclusion, the people take drastic measures to feel closeness to one another and something greater than themselves.

The text describes how "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him 'Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for we do not know what has happened to Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt.'" (Exodus 32:1). Very interestingly, the text here is intentional in its use of pronouns and verbiage once again. When explaining the people's choice to beseech Aaron to create an idol for them, the statement וַיִּקָּהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן is used. As with the word וַיִּחַן earlier, the word וַיִּקָּהֵל is used to describe the nation in the singular. Even more peculiar, though, is how the word עַל, commonly translated as on or against, is utilized by the nation's formation as a collective in this instance, which was due not to their shared belief in something, but rather in their common purpose against something else, namely God and Moses. Finally, the word וַיִּקָּהֵל contained the root for the word Kehila, which is used in modern Hebrew to mean a community.

Later, as the nation had Aaron collect all of their gold jewelry, the famous scene of the golden calf took place. Now, just as they were before the revelation at Sinai, the people of Israel were a community.

Although they were no longer a community of those of shared experience or values, but one with the common goal of ridding themselves of the void left by the absence of God and Moses. Through this narrative and the language intentionally presented in the Torah, the people reflect the idea presented by Watson and Skinner that their environment strongly dictated individual decision-making, ultimately yielding a group of individuals joined by necessity, not by a common good.

Nonetheless, the Torah, in the very next parsha, Vayakhel, presented a contrasting narrative, asserting an equation that would enable the Jewish people to maintain a community for the remainder of their existence. This concept is known as smuchim, when the Torah placed two ideas adjacent to one another to depict a juxtaposition. In Vayakhel, the verse states, "Moses then convoked the whole Israelite community and said to them: 'These are the things that GOD has commanded you to do'" (Exodus 35:1). Now, the actions of Moses are described using the very same word that was employed during the formation of the golden calf, וַיִּקָּהֵל, however, what follows is very differnt.

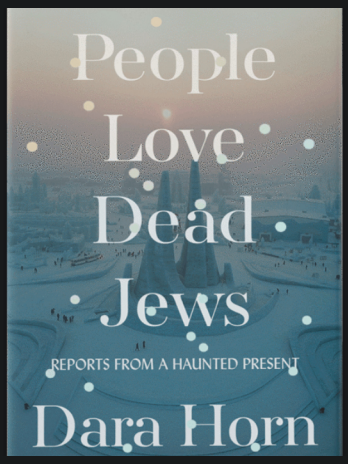
Moses recounts to the people the concept of Shabbat. He explains that God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day, you shall rest just as he did. Nevertheless, it is peculiar that he should gather the entire nation and state this to them, as it is already explicitly mentioned to them earlier in the Torah. Clearly, the text is deliberately engaging with the concept of smuchim. Moses recognizes why the people felt they had to create the golden calf in the first place. Although they were together physically, they were not a kehilah; they needed something that would promote true connection with one another and with God. Shabbat was the answer, and has continued to be for all of Jewish history.

In a world where community has shifted increasingly to social media and online platforms, Shabbat forces individuals to remain present and engage with others in a meaningful and deliberate way. Furthermore, the Torah expresses that community is not formed in gathering against a collective idea, as in the instance of the golden calf, but through sharing an experience with those around you.

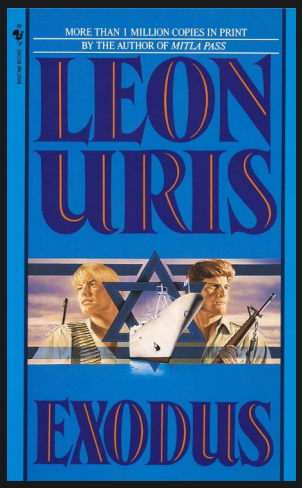
In many ways, the story of the golden calf feels uncomfortably relevant today. People still gather quickly and intensely, often not around shared values, but around shared frustration or a desire to fill a void. These "communities" can feel powerful in the moment, but like the golden calf, they are often built on instability and ultimately fail to provide genuine meaning. The Torah's response through Shabbat displays how true community cannot be formed out of reaction or absence, but through intention and purposeful engagement. The challenge, then, is not simply to be a part of a community, but to ask what kind of community we are choosing to be a part of and whether it is actually shaping us into better versions of ourselves.

As Judaism continues to face existential threats, the Torah makes it explicit how to maintain the sense of community that we have held for thousands of years. Shabbat does more than provide comfort in the face of loneliness; it creates a consistent structure in which people are forced to be present with one another and with God. Today, when connection is often shallow or temporary, that kind of intentional community becomes not just meaningful, but necessary for the continuity of Jewish peoplehood.

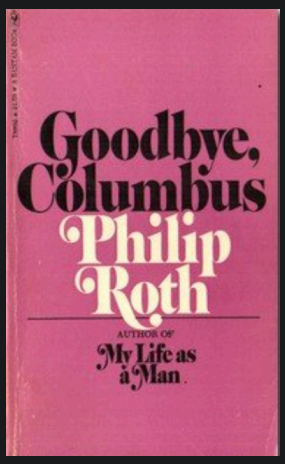
READ A BOOK THIS SHABBAT



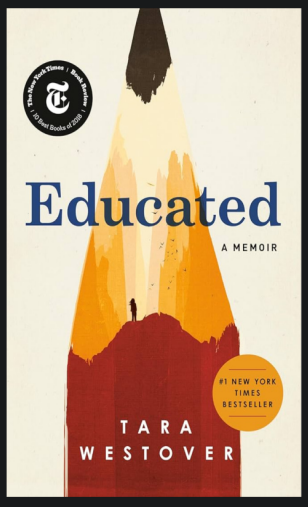
Dara Horn writes in digestible chapters, telling the stories of monumental moments from Jewish history, and how they have shaped the world's understanding of who Jews are, why we exist, and why everyone loves to see us dead



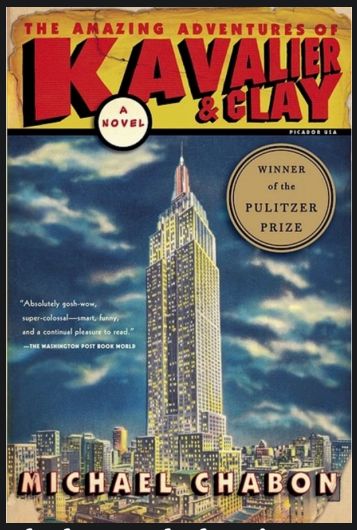
Leon Uris makes an epic out of the State of Israel's founding. Spanning generations and countries, the world he creates is more vibrant and complex than one could imagine. It's a thrilling read, but readers should keep in mind that it's a work of fiction.



Philip Roth tells the story of a young man, exploring women, the world, and ultimately himself. Jewish manhood, in all of Neil Klugman's sometimes sex-obsessed descriptions. This is a fast read that will, without a question, make you laugh.



Imagine you are sitting in a college lecture and learning that one of your classmates has never heard of the Holocaust. For Tara Westover, this wasn't hypothetical, it was her reality; she was that classmate. In her memoir Educated, Westover reveals her upbringing in a strict survivalist family that rejected formal schooling, leaving her unaware of even the most basic historic knowledge. The book describes Westover's remarkable journey growing up in an isolated, physically and emotionally abusive, household, to eventually earning a PhD from Cambridge University. Westover reveals the challenges of growing up completely cut off from society and the immense courage it took to obtain education despite the odds against her.



Chabon explores themes of family and identity, Jewish mysticism, escapism, and the American Dream by following cousins Josef Kavalier and Sammy Klayman—modeled after the Jewish writers of Superman, Jerry Siegel and Jose Shuster—through the comic book Golden Age. Spanning across time and place, Chabon's historical fiction novel is funny, informative, and deeply moving.

Towards an Understanding of Jewish Peoplehood

By: Gabi Stern

Two models for Jewish identity have dominated both Jewish and non-Jewish thought: the religious and cultural model. The former claims Jews are a group that shares beliefs and practices, and the latter says that Jews are a racial or ethnic group bound by ancestry. Recent history has highlighted the flaws with both of these frameworks and given popularity to one of nationhood. However, the notion of Jews as a nation is not without its own flaws, and this ambiguity stresses the need for a new conception of Jewish identity. Rather than a religious or racial group, Jews should be thought of as a people whose community integrates numerous aspects of Judaism, including religious, historical, cultural, and national identities. These identities, while distinct, do not exist without the others, and come together to create a global, unified Jewish people.

To start, we need to understand what Jewish peoplehood is and the existing scholarship in its definition. Dr. Misha Galperin and Dr. Erica Brown write in their book "The Case for Jewish Peoplehood: Can We Be One?" that "Jewish peoplehood signifies kinship based on a common history, culture, values, and future. Peoplehood involves an attempt to unify a group that is diverse." All faces of Jewish identity unify in order to create a community where Jews of all backgrounds can feel like they belong. Jews feel attached to each other because of their shared traditions and history, and it is these values that define the Jewish people. Expanding on this definition, I believe that the specific paths of "kinship" include religious or spiritual connection, shared history and ancestry, continuity of Jewish culture, and connection to the Land of Israel as a national symbol.

These are all undeniable parts of Judaism, although the degree to which a person relates to each one may vary. For example, in Jewish custom, we don't acknowledge the right to self-identify as not Jewish; even if a person converts to another religion, Jewish law still sees them as Jewish. A lack of religious connection does not take away from their family ancestry and history. Conversely, a convert to Judaism would not share the genetic links to Judaism, but is still equally Jewish by nature of their religious commitment. By the same logic, a far-right Chassidic Jew or a far-left Jewish college student who denounces the State of Israel and its Jewish significance is not any less a part of the Jewish community. By nature of their Jewish birth, they are inseparably tied to Israel. Simply put, Jewish identity is not a choice.

The first aspect of Jewish peoplehood is religious identity. For observant Jews, days are often centered around Judaic practice. In Jewish law, one is supposed to pray three times a day; in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Every time you eat, you are supposed to say a blessing before and after, which varies depending on what kind of food or drink it is. Jewish law also says that men should cover their heads and wear cornered garments with tassels on them (called tzitzit). In the orthodox, modern-orthodox, and traditional communities, observance of these laws varies, but they are all valued and generally accepted and practiced. These common practices are a large part of what binds Jews together. Believed to be written in the 1940s, Erich Unger's essay "A Restatement of Judaism that" argues that "the survival of the Jews until now is, to an overwhelming degree, due to their attachment to Judaism." The value of these collective practices is an essential part of Judaism.

However, a majority of Jews do not view religion as an important part of their lives. And yet many are still involved in Jewish practice. In a Pew Research study, almost half of Israeli Jews said that Judaism is, at a minimum, partly a matter of religion. This includes 17% of secular Jews who say that religion is a fundamental part of their Jewish identity. Over half of secular Israeli Jews said they at least occasionally light candles before Shabbat (the sabbath), almost ⅓ said they fasted for all of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), and a whopping 87% said they go to Passover seders (meals). This is also evident in the US. 62% of American Jews attend a Passover seder, and almost half fasted on Yom Kippur and meaningfully mark Shabbat, to cite just a few impressive statistics. As a personal example, I've met people here at UMD who noticed I am Jewish and asked me about getting involved in religious events. Even for those who do not have a deep connection to Jewish rituals, the tie between Judaism and these practices is undeniable.

Another facet of Jewish peoplehood is shared ancestry and history. As different as Jews around the world look, studies show that Jews are very closely related to one another. Numerous common genetic markers have been found linking Jews from around the world. Additionally, a 2012 study, researchers concluded that,"the North African Jewish populations clustered with the European and Middle Eastern Jewish groups...but not with the North African non-Jewish groups, suggesting origins distinctive from the latter," Another Pew Research Center study, on Jewish American heritage, found that even though the number of Jewish mixed race families is growing, and 20% of American Jews identify as non-white, over 90% of American Jews select white and non-Hispanic as their race on official government and medical forms.

All of the above about ethnic similarity is true, while also

appreciating the great diversity of the Jewish People. There are historic Jewish communities all over the world. Yet for all this diversity, every one of these communities shares the core origin story of the Jewish People. Yes, the genetic link is strong, but maybe even stronger is the common narrative that each of these communities has preserved for so long; a narrative of Jacob, Moses, and David, of living texts and customs, and of unity. That history shapes the collective Jewish identity and familially binds Jews to each other.

While the religious and historical faces of Jewish identity may be the most commonly known, just like any other people, Jews have developed their own culture, including languages, foods, and arts, which Jews of all backgrounds embrace. Jewish culture (like all cultures) is influenced by the local culture of where Jews are living, but it maintains a distinctly Judaic flair, keeping it distinguished over so many years. Foods like kugel and chamin, which have roots in Ashkenazi communities in Europe and Sephardic communities in Iberia and the Middle East, are staples of Jewish households with recipes that have been passed down for generations. Klezmer music, a genre forged in Eastern Europe with Turkish and Romani influences, is still sung at Jewish weddings and festivals today. Languages like Yiddish and Ladino (combinations of German and Hebrew, and Spanish and Hebrew, respectively) have rich histories of literature and poetry. Celebrating holidays is also a part of cultural Judaism. Many Jews celebrate holidays not for religious reasons, but because it is their family's and people's tradition. These traditions, linguistic, artistic, and ritualistic, help sustain Jewish culture and define Jewish Peoplehood.

Perhaps the most polarizing part of Jewish identity is nationhood.

The tiny sliver of land just south of Lebanon, in between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, might be the most fought-over piece of land in history.

Scholars generally outline two definitions of a nation: nation as territorial state, and nation as group of people. Jews feel an attachment to both of these definitions. As a group of people, Jews are a distinct religious, ethnic, and cultural group.

As a territorial state, Jews have a strong connection to the Land of Israel and a rich history of national identity there. Under the Davidic dynasty, the kingdom of Judea thrived for hundreds of years, building a temple in Jerusalem which became a national landmark for the Judean nation. Coins from the Hasmonean dynasty and the Bar Kochba revolt have been discovered with inscriptions of Hasmonean kings' names and the temple, further emphasizing the historical continuance of the Jewish nationhood.

Although the Jews' historical and national connection to Israel is deep and fervent, a possibly deeper connection to Israel is an emotional and communal one. Over the millennia, Jews have been enslaved, expelled, and exterminated, but what has kept our spirit alive is our love for Israel. For thousands of years, commentators on the Torah from all over the world have written entire books on Jewish laws that only apply when in Israel, hoping one day they would merit to return to their people's land and practice these laws. Every day, three times a day, we pray for the ingathering of the exiles and our return to Zion. Artists and poets have spent centuries fantasizing over Israel, painting pictures of the temple and writing stories of longing. Israel, especially for Jews in the diaspora, symbolizes our communal, emotional bond to each other, and is a source of unity for our people.

There is also a strong emotional and symbolic importance to Israel. 58% of American Jews polled by Pew Research in 2020 said that they are at least somewhat emotionally attached to the State of Israel, and 80% say that Israel is important or essential to their Judaism.

Israel acts as a symbol of global Jewish welfare. When the State struggles, Jews around the world share in her pain, and when the State succeeds, global Jewry rejoices.

Through enslavement, expulsion, and extermination, Israel has remained a source of communal hope, as evidenced in the Israeli national anthem, Hatikvah (The Hope).

Judaism does not exist in a binary model of religion or ethnicity. It does not exist as an elitist, nationalist group. Peoplehood, with identity paths of religion, history, culture, and nationhood is a more complete model of Jewish identity. I believe that knowledge and appreciation of who we are, and the confidence and competence with which we communicate that with others, is a valuable step towards reducing antisemitism. Whether in international advocacy or on college campuses, this understanding should empower Jews to speak up for themselves; it's a step toward reeducating a chronically misinformed public, breaking down biases, and reducing antisemitic acts.

This disparity reflects that if there were an option to check "Jewish," more Jews might choose that over "black" or "white." Both the genetic commonalities and disparity in racial self-identification prove that Judaism cannot be viewed as strictly a religion.

Mitzpeh Debates

The Talmud, a compilation of debates over Jewish law spanning centuries and continents, has taught the learned Jew how to debate. Let us not forget this ancient art.

Community

When caring for your own and caring for a stranger come into conflict, what should Jews do?

Despite the tribalistic urge to assign higher moral worth to our own instead of strangers, we should not let our religion bias our perspective on the fundamental equality of peoples. It might be the case that we're more likely to prioritize the life of a Jewish person over that of a non-Jewish person, but that does not make it right in any conceivable sense. Whether or not someone's family happened to be geographically concentrated in an area that produced a higher probability of them adhering to one specific religion has no bearing on how much we should care for them. It does not logically follow. The greatness of Western civilization is dictated by how closely we follow our core precept of equal moral consideration for all human beings, and no tribalistic identifier supersedes that. **- Gabriel Goldberg**

Jews should always stick together during conflict. Unity played a crucial role in moving forward after October 7. Putting our faith in each other and the success of Israel made it possible to endure until all of the hostages were freed and returned home. It also reminded us how easy it is for others to fall back into the trap of antisemitism. If no one will come to our aid in times of need, Jews must be there for one another to overcome adversity again and again."

- Adam Lipman

The quote is "love the stranger as yourself," and so if you are in a place where you don't have love for yourself, you don't have love to give to other people. The same way many rules and laws can be broken when your life is at stake, there is a less intense thematic application of the same principle here.

The same way you would prioritize taking care of your own family before someone else's — it's not that the other people are any less valuable, but when you only have so much to give, it's encouraged to take care of yourself and those closest to you, at least enough that you can then give your best to the stranger who needs you. Everyone is created in the image of God, so it's not about who is more important or more deserving, but about the fact that the harm we would be doing to ourselves by giving from an empty place outweighs the good that would come from helping the stranger. **- Gaby Ross**

What has allowed the Jewish people to remain for so long is not only observance of Torah and Mitzvot but the collective care we share for one another. This does not mean to neglect those who are unlike us, but to recognize the responsibility we have to one another. When we look at each Jew as a brother or sister, we acknowledge the shared history that is inherent in our bond. When choosing between helping kin, or helping those who are more distant, a Jew should feel obligated to maintain our legacy and help those who are family. **- Aden Lerner**

The stranger is not incidental to Jewish identity. We know who we are largely because of who we are not, and who has, at various points in history, made that distinction violently clear. If a Jew ever faces the choice to help a Jew or help a stranger - help your fellow Jew first. But know this: if the stranger was ever truly a stranger to you, you were not yet living as a Jew. **- Ava Rowse**

BROADWAY MUSICALS

BY: GABRIELLA KURZROK

A VERY JEWISH ORIGIN STORY

Broadway did not always live in people's minds for the flashing marquees and $400 orchestra seats. The peak of American theater used to rely almost exclusively on the support of middle and working-class immigrant communities. Jewish immigrants especially offered their support, shaping the growing industry with their own cultural lives. Many of those who fled from Europe weren't chasing opportunity, but running from antisemitism, violent pogroms and political instability. In a new and unfamiliar city, theatre became a place to build belonging as outsiders in a new world.

Jews fleeing Europe stepped off huge steamships into a chaotic, crowded city and searched for cheap housing, factory jobs and a cultural support system. Many settled in the same place, the Lower East Side in New York City, where Yiddish words filled tenement buildings and streets packed with people, pushcarts, and vendors. Life was difficult, but culturally vibrant.

On small Yiddish stages stacked between tenements and storefronts, families try to hold themselves together, navigate survival, find faith in uncertainty, and find humor in times of grief. People came not to escape their lives, but to live and endure the hardships with others who understood. It's not expected to become something large or lavish: it just offers comfort and company. But as time passes, the small stages become something much larger.

As New York City streets expand, neighborhoods rise, industries expand—and take musical theatre with them. As the relevance and joy of musical theatre become apparent, it shifts into an organized industry in the hands of a small number of powerful producers—the Theatrical Syndicate. What was once sacred and local is beginning to consolidate into monopoly systems and networks that decide which stories get told across the country, where, and how, and many aren't pleased. The criticism often veers from the unfairness of the system to blatant antisemitism as many of the controlling men are Jewish. But Broadway still carries the imprint of where it came from.

Immigrant theatre-makers continue shaping it from inside these systems. The Shubert brothers, born into a Lithuanian-Jewish family, build their own network of theatres at first of economic necessity (like many other Jewish immigrants), but then in response to the tightening control of the industry's venues, tours, and residencies. They are competitors, builders and controllers in their own way, but they continue to open up the physical space of Broadway, so much so that the government steps in and regulates their ownership of the stage. But the stage is no longer small, and the industry rules a little looser, and the impulse behind it all still feels familiar.

By the time Broadway enters its Golden Age, it's become a fully formed industry that's still (though glanced over) rooted in the small stages of the Lower East Side. Many of the people shaping it are still carrying their own stories and histories of displacement and belonging, even when they are not directly spoken. The stories onstage grow larger, more polished, and more lavish, but the plotlines and morals stay consistent: the question of where a person belongs and what it means to build life in a place that is still learning how to see people like you.

“Oklahoma!” premieres in 1942, composed by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. The show opens not with a chorus line, but a single voice: quiet, almost casual, before the world musical fully reveals itself. Songs don’t interrupt the story; they are the story. Conversations slip in and out of lyrics, composition carries emotion, and characters don’t pause to perform; they live through the performance itself. Instead of watching separate acts stitched together, the audience is pulled into something continuous, where feeling and tension build without breaking. What unfolds isn’t a large spectacle, a world that moves as real emotion and life do. But what mattered wasn’t necessarily the structure, but what the structure allowed.

When the story is continuous, the desperation, nostalgia, and optimism are too, and composers and lyricists began to be able to build entire emotional worlds that don’t pause for explanation. They’re not just fairy tales and stories (though are they ever?), they’re ways of thinking out loud through music. About who gets to belong, who is pushed out, and what it means to live in the space between. Jewish composers and lyricists play a central role in defining Broadway’s storytelling by writing stories where characters are often slightly out of place within their own worlds, searching for where they fit. Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim use the art to ask questions about identity, conflict and belonging in works “West Side Story”, “Sweeney Todd”, and “Into the Woods”. The little red riding hood, after her village is destroyed by a giant, has to find family, belonging, and safety in a new forest she’s never explored. Sound familiar? Even when the stories are not explicitly about Jewish life, the sense of displacement, negotiation, and searching often remains underneath. Some stories dare to bring that into the open.

When “Fiddler on the Roof” opens in 1964, it does something all of Broadway had hesitated to do: place Jewish life center stage. A village in imperial Russia, a family trying to hold on to tradition while the world shifts around them, a community trying to stay intact while everything outside of it changes. Based on traditional Yiddish stories, the musical poses simple questions: how do you stay who you are when the world is always changing? What do you keep? What should you let go?

Early critics and investors hesitate, worrying that both the story and the production team are too Jewish for Broadway—yet the show premieres on time after having trouble finding investors. But audiences don’t feel the same; rather than the production feeling narrow and unrelated, it's deeply familiar, because even if the setting and characters are specific, the feelings throughout the story aren’t. Survival in change, tradition in movement, and communities under pressure is an almost universal worry in 1960s America, and over time Broadway becomes more than a place where one community tells a story.

The theatre becomes a shared place of aspiration, reflection, and mobility. And slowly, without being formally defined, Broadway becomes a sort of template to tell stories about becoming, and leaving one world and entering another. Other communities begin to use it to tell their own stories. “Rent,” “The Color Purple,” “The Book of Mormon”: each is different, each is grounded in a completely different lived experience, but they all use the same idea that a personal story can become a shared experience when it’s placed in a musical. The form expands, but the foundation and objectives stay the same.

Modern Jewish writers and composers still build on what came before. “Dear Evan Hansen” by lyricist Benji Pasek, “Wicked” with compositions by Stephen Schwartz, and “Ragtime” all work in different styles, carrying stories from immigrant stories to flying monkeys, but they still use the same language Broadway developed long before: emotion turned into music, identity turned into performance, and private experience turned into public recognition. The musicals don’t introduce these themes as new to society, but use the format that came from a different crowded street, without the lights, marquees, and traffic. Back to the early Lower East Side, where language and food and work and storytelling all existed in the same dense, layered space. Where people who had been told they didn’t belong anywhere belonged to each other, even through the hardships of the neighborhood around them.

Yiddish theatre wasn’t an escape, but a recognition: where the story on stage says “I am here, and I see you here too”. People sitting shoulder to shoulder watched pieces of their own lives unfold in front of them—familiar struggles, humor, and hopes—and shared out loud in a way that made it a little less difficult to carry alone. And the sense of recognition didn’t disappear as Broadway grew: the stages got bigger, the audience widened, and the stories came from more places, but the instinct stayed the same. People still gather in the dark, laughing at the same moments, going quiet in others, and feeling something shift when a story sounds a little too familiar. Broadway may now be known for lights and spectacle, but underneath the costumes, the purpose is the same: not to just watch a performance, but to realize that you aren’t the only one feeling it.

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